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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses both the persistent and changing features of rhetorical criticism during the past 60 years. From a review of 75 critical studies that were published from 1915 to 1925, from 1965 to 1968, in 1973, and from 1975 to 1977, three observations are made: First, most studies of rhetorical criticism have been, and continue to be, case studies. Second, very few essays are devoted directly to critical theory, indicating a persistent weakness in rhetorical criticism. Third, rhetorical criticism in the second half of the 1900s has focused on particular attitudes toward rhetoric, and this concern with "movements" or "genres" has added to the scope of rhetorical criticism, making the "logos" of rhetoric more complex and more interesting to study. (RL)

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PERMANENCE AND CHANGE IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Carroll C. Arnold

Criticism of rhetorical activity, as we understand it, has a relatively short history. Even so, I cannot sketch the modern record properly in fifteen minutes. I can only sample the character of rhetorical criticism in the past 60 years and comment on two of its persistent features and one of its major shifts.

Wichelns was right to say in 1925 that to that time there had been no comprehensive criticism of rhetorical activity. He was right even though the Quarterly Journal of Speech had already published at least sixteen critical essays. Nonetheless, it was true that rhetorical analysis had had little place in general historical, biographical, and literary study. What rhetorical criticism there was was only beginning to appear, and viewed retrospectively it had interesting promise. For example, in its first decade QJS published six studies of the styles or general practice of individual speakers, two genre studies (the Latin panegyric and "saddle bag" rhetoric), two essays on classroom criticism, two on relations between specific rhetorical features and effectiveness with audiences, and one essay each on comparative rhetorical practices, the distinction between rhetoric and poetic, persuasive methods, and extemporaneous style. Of the kinds of rhetoric we study today, only "movements" are obviously missing from this list. But this does not mean that the more things change the more they remain the same.

What has remained the same is chiefly the kinds of

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rhetoric that have interested rhetorical critics. What have changed at least somewhat are the amounts of rhetoric critics have tried to bring under interpretation and judgment and the critical models they have used. Relative to choosing critical models, it seems to me some serious problems have persisted.

To sharpen my general acquaintance with the record I have reviewed the essays I would call fundamentally critical that were published in QJS in its first 10 years, during 1965-through 1968, and from the beginning of 1975 through April 1977. To these samples I added the 11 essays appearing in Explorations in Rhetorical Criticism,[1] simply because the critical essays in that book were chosen for their methodological differences. This coverage yields 75 critical studies. I know this is not a perfect representation of what rhetorical critics have done since 1915, but when you inspect these 75 studies some interesting things emerge. (1) In each of the four groups (three periods in QJS and Explorations) slightly less than half of the studies are case studies--usually of a single speaker or a single speech. (2) In the first decade of QJS five of 19 studies dealt with some "flow" of rhetoric--either an alleged genre or the rhetoric of something we might call a "movement" though the authors did not so identify what they studied. In 1965-1968, eight of 32 essays were of this last sort, but in 1975 through April 1977, 17 of 37 studies--nearly half--were "movement" and/or "genre" studies. In Explorations (published in 1973) five of 11 pieces are of this kind. So, if my sampling tells anything at all, it says that "movements" and "genres" and other "collective" conceptions of rhetoric have become especially important to contemporary critics. If

we needed more support for that generalization, examination of papers submitted for the recent SCA conference on "Significant Form in Rhetorical Criticism" would provide it. But, this said, a third thing should not be missed: (3) in each of my samples, critical studies of single speeches, single speakers, and single rhetorical events made up nearly half of the total output. The case study is very much alive and well!

The fourth thing my sampling told me was a surprise and something I shall want to discuss more fully later. (4) QJS published no essays on theory of rhetorical criticism or why one should do criticism (except in the classroom) in its first decade. But the surprise came when I found only six such essays in the period of 1965-1968 and only five pieces on theory of criticism from 1975-April 1977. Now, of course, a number of the case, movement, and genre studies in the later years claimed to illustrate some valued critical method, and all of the criticism in Explorations undertakes to do that; nonetheless, I am struck by the general paucity of essays directly devoted to critical theory as such, and I think this has been a persisting weakness in our critical literature.

It seems to me the case that from the beginning basic methods of analyzing rhetoric have been gathered together or borrowed with minimal attention to what criticism ought to show to specialists or contribute to general culture. Take our oldest instance. For some time, critics took the Roman outline of a speech maker's problems in composition and presentation as critical headings; they combined that list of topics with criteria for historiographical accuracy and interpretation. The Roman

outline was never conceived for critical purposes, and the criteria of historiography were peripheral to questions of rhetorical expertise. So, unless critics wrenched the formulae by adding psychological and psycholinguistic criteria for interpreting human behavior, the method yielded chiefly historical description of rhetorical events. Baskerville has recently reiterated the case for such description,[2] and I have no argument with him. My only point is that where criticism is wanted, the early methodology I've sketched won't produce it--something that careful thought about theory of criticism could have told from the beginning. As Stephen Lucas stresses in the Foreword to his Portents of Rebellion, criteria for historical judgments, per se, will not explain "the processes of persuasion and reinforcement by which seminal ideas and perceptions were articulated, fostered, promulgated, and intensified."[3] For that purpose criticism must apply criteria of rhetorical potency and impotency to situational, rhetorical events. More careful, more philosophical, exploration of the ends of criticism and the nature of rhetorical experience could have forestalled much of the facidity of some of our early critical efforts, but it wasn't there. Neither do we have much contemporary analysis of presuppositions implicit in more recent borrowings from literary criticism and, sometimes, from some strains of anthropology.

Consider the concepts "symbolic form," "symbolic action," and "genre." There are very fundamental questions about symbolism, forms, and typologies which, as far as I can perceive, have seldom been raised in published discussions of criticism. A most basic question is: What is the nature of the percepts

which symbols symbolize? Whether we answer that antecedent percepts exist or don't exist functionally, there is the further question of how different valuings of alternative symbolic actions come about. We must be able to answer that, at least hypothetically, or there can be no critical discrimination between the rhetorically powerful and the rhetorically weak--there can only be description again.

What seems our continual neglect of theoretical underpinnings appears again in respect to the concept "genre." A year ago at this convention there was an excellent program on "Significant Form in Rhetorical Criticism" where some of the basics concerning that concept were aired. Herb Simons expressed hope for an ultimate "science of genres" that could set forth the rules or laws of the genres' natures. No one promised to fulfill Herb's hopes; and Bruce Gronbeck responded that, "There is no great chain of rhetorical forms. ... We shall not find and don't need a 'master class' of generic structures across rhetorical usages." And Karlyn Campbell spoke incisively of the logical difficulty of establishing that any given genre of discourse exists.[4] This was the kind of heads-on consideration of theoretical bases of rhetorical criticism that appears so infrequently in our critical literature. At least within our professional enclave, rhetorical criticism has proceeded for more than 60 years without much such penetrating discussion of why criticism should be done as it is being done.

But despite the admonitory tone of what I've just said, I think the very difficulties I've alluded to are associated with an important, positive, but frustrating shift in our con-

ception of rhetorical communication itself. To roughly the midpoint in this century rhetoric was usually treated as though its logos were primarily argumentative. Perhaps the critics' earlier interest in argumentation and debate was a reason; perhaps the general acceptance of logical positivism and the widespread confidence that certainty and final proof are possible in this world were reasons. In any case, there was a tendency to equate rhetoric with argumentation. But that inclination has now diminished dramatically. Today, like critics in many other academic and philosophical enterprises, we struggle to expose, understand, and valuate more than the formally "logical" vectors of communicative meaning. We wrestle with concepts like "form," "image," "structure," "chain," "persona," "fantasy," "myth," "dialectic"--in a kind of Hegelian sense, and "movement" in the sense of a movement in a symphony. Why? Is it not that we are attempting to express the interaction of nonpropositional as well as propositional contents of rhetorical experience? I think so, and I think this reflects a maturing appreciation of the complexity of logos.

So far, neither we rhetorical critics nor anyone else I know of possess much more than a conviction that non-"logical" (but not illogical) forms, shapes, and themes recur in influential ways, often trailing out in relatively predictable fashions once begun. But the conviction leaves us unguided as to how to discriminate the significant from the insignificant forms and how to distinguish imaginary from rhetorically "real" shapes and congeries. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have given us some 65 major, relatively systematic patterns in which "arguings" can and do occur; Burke points to many more, less formally

"logical" ones; Frye seems to see special forms as well as genres everywhere; and structuralists search for primordial forms presumably governing all our behaviors. And so it goes. Having given up the paradigms of formal argument as predictive of stimulative form in rhetoric, we are rather at sixes and sevens about how to conceptualize what pattern really is, as shape or as stimulus.

I don't know where to go from here, and I don't think anyone else does either. Rhetorical criticism, like much other criticism has reached a frustrating, confusing state; but I don't think that's necessarily a misfortune. As we struggle toward some resolution of the problem of what structure or form is in rhetoric-in-process, we shall probably learn more than we so far even imagine about communicative experience. Our record suggests two cautions, however.

We shall do well to remember that even Ernst Cassirer, whose pursuit of explanatory, overarching, symbolic forms lies behind much of our search for order in intricacy--even he found that search unproductive in some circumstances. In his last published paper he said of the Italian Renaissance that what we learn

> is only the fact that the period of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento is too subtle and too complicated a phenomenon to be described by any simple term or abstract formula. All such formulae are bound to fail. ... when we begin to deal with any special problem or any individual thinker, we must forget them. In every particular investigation the question must be raised anew and answered independently.[5]

A too eager search for encapsulating "myths" or "forms" can bring, and in identifiable instances has brought, rhetorical critics to generalize too sweepingly, ~~losing~~ and to lose sight of the particular case and its uniqueness.

The other caution I adduce from ~~the~~ our record is related. We must guard against reducing what was rhetoric-in-action to artifact. Historians, literary critics, and semiologists can handle communicative artifacts. Our fullest contribution to general understanding and to rhetorical theory will arise from constant awareness of the dynamics of rhetorical experience.

What my review teaches me is that what rhetorical criticism studies has changed little over 60 years, that we have been and continue to be weak in critical theory, and that since we discovered there was more to the logos of rhetoric than argument we've been having and probably will continue to have an exciting, anything but useless, flounder.

Endnotes

1 Charles J. Stewart, Donovan J. Ochs, Gerald P. Mohrmann eds. Explorations in Rhetorical Criticism (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973).

2 Barnet Baskerville, "Must We All Be 'Rhetorical Critics'?" Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63 (April 1977), 107-116.

3 Stephen E. Lucas, Portents of Rebellion (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1976), p. xiv. My emphasis.

4 Speech Communication Association, 1976 Convention, Tape 24.03.

5 Ernst Cassirer, "Ficino's Place in Intellectual History," Journal of the History of Ideas, 6 (1945), 483-484.